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AUTHOR Phelps, Erin M.
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ABSTRACT

Potential profits in terms of advertising supports and audience size are usually the determinants of what entertainment programs are broadcast on television. Interviews conducted with children, adolescents, and adults show that understanding of this economic basis for the selection process for entertainment programming increases with age. This knowledge had been gained primarily from reading, with the least knowledge gained from actual experience. Further research will attempt to determine whether information about the television industry will encourage people to be more evaluative of programming. (STS)

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Knowledge of the Television Industry and Relevant First-Hand Experience

September 5, 1976

by

Erin M. Phelps

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KNOWLEDGE OF THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY

AND RELEVANT FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Erin M. Phelps

Harvard University

Paper presented at the annual meeting
of the American Psychological Association

Washington, D.C.

September 5, 1976

Profit-making is the primary motive for most of the television programming Americans watch. Income is derived primarily from the sale of advertising time, with the price dependent upon audience size and, to some extent, audience characteristics. These facts should not obscure our recognition that program creators and schedulers often strive to present facts or to deal with social issues on television. Nonetheless, potential profits are usually the determinants of what is broadcast.

One of our initial assumptions was that knowledge of these motives would make people more hesitant to believe entertainment programming. We also hypothesized that knowledge of production techniques, derived either from actual or vicarious experience, would increase people's critical evaluation of television content.

One section of our interviews explored how much people knew about the television industry and another explored their own experience with the medium, through reading, courses, tours, or hands-on experiences. We asked adolescents and adults questions about the industry, such as: How do you think they decide what programs to put on and when to put them on? Why do you think entertainment programs are put on television? and, How do you think money and large audiences affect how true-to-life TV is? These questions were made more concrete in the interview with the children.

To assess our interviewee's experience with television, we asked all of them if they had ever taken a course about television and whether or not they had used a movie or video camera. We also asked adults and

adolescents if they read about television, and we asked children questions about their experience visiting television studios, seeing programs being made, and talking about television in school.

Let me give you some feeling for the range of knowledge about the industry shown by the people we interviewed. One of the most knowledgeable adults told us that certain programs were broadcast because:

> They're looking for the most viewers. So they're going to put them on in the times when they think the most people are watching, so they can sell their products. Even Channel 2 [the PBS station in Boston] they aren't selling products, they're still going to get their programs to the times when the most people they think are interested are watching.

A 13-year-old, on the other hand felt that entertainment programs were put on the air "To entertain people when they have nothing to do." In contrast, one second grader told us that the reason programs are put on television is "to teach children...about how to act and all that," while one kindergartener believed that television programs are broadcast "because if you don't have a television program, you can't have electricity."

In order to standardize comments like these, measures of factual knowledge of the television industry were devised. The measures are based on knowledge of the economic motives behind the programming. For the adolescents and adults there were four levels of knowledge and for the children there were six levels of knowledge (see Table 1). For all the subjects, each sentence or combination of sentences was scaled according to the level of understanding it reflected.

Insert Table 1 about here

Full Understanding means that the subject knew both that money from advertising supports television programs and that this support depends on audience size. Partial Understanding means that the subject knew either that money from advertising time supports television or that this support depends on audience size. Understanding Isolated Facts means that the subject had accurate knowledge of advertising, audience size or television production without connecting them together. Misconceptions means that the subject gave us responses indicating misunderstanding of some aspect of the television industry.

Two additional levels of understanding were used for the children's comments, because they occurred more at the lower end of the scale, and

Levels of Understanding

ADULT AND ADOLESCENT	CHILD
Full Understanding	Full Understanding
Partial Understanding	Partial Understanding
Understanding Isolated Facts	Understanding Isolated Facts
--------	Understanding Peripheral Facts
Misconceptions	Misconceptions
--------	No Understanding

we wanted finer distinctions there. Understanding Peripheral Facts was added between Isolated Facts and Misconceptions to indicate partially correct knowledge of advertising, audience size or television production, again without relating any of them. No Understanding was added to code comments like "I don't know," when absolutely no other information was given.

The information obtained about our interviewee's experience with television consisted mostly of yes and no answers which were coded accordingly. In order to analyze the information coded with the Phase I and Phase II Industry Knowledge Scales, three summary measures were derived from the level of understanding ratings:

1. the most sophisticated level of understanding ever expressed by each subject in a statement or combination of statements;

2. the least sophisticated level of understanding expressed; and

3. the level of understanding most frequently expressed.

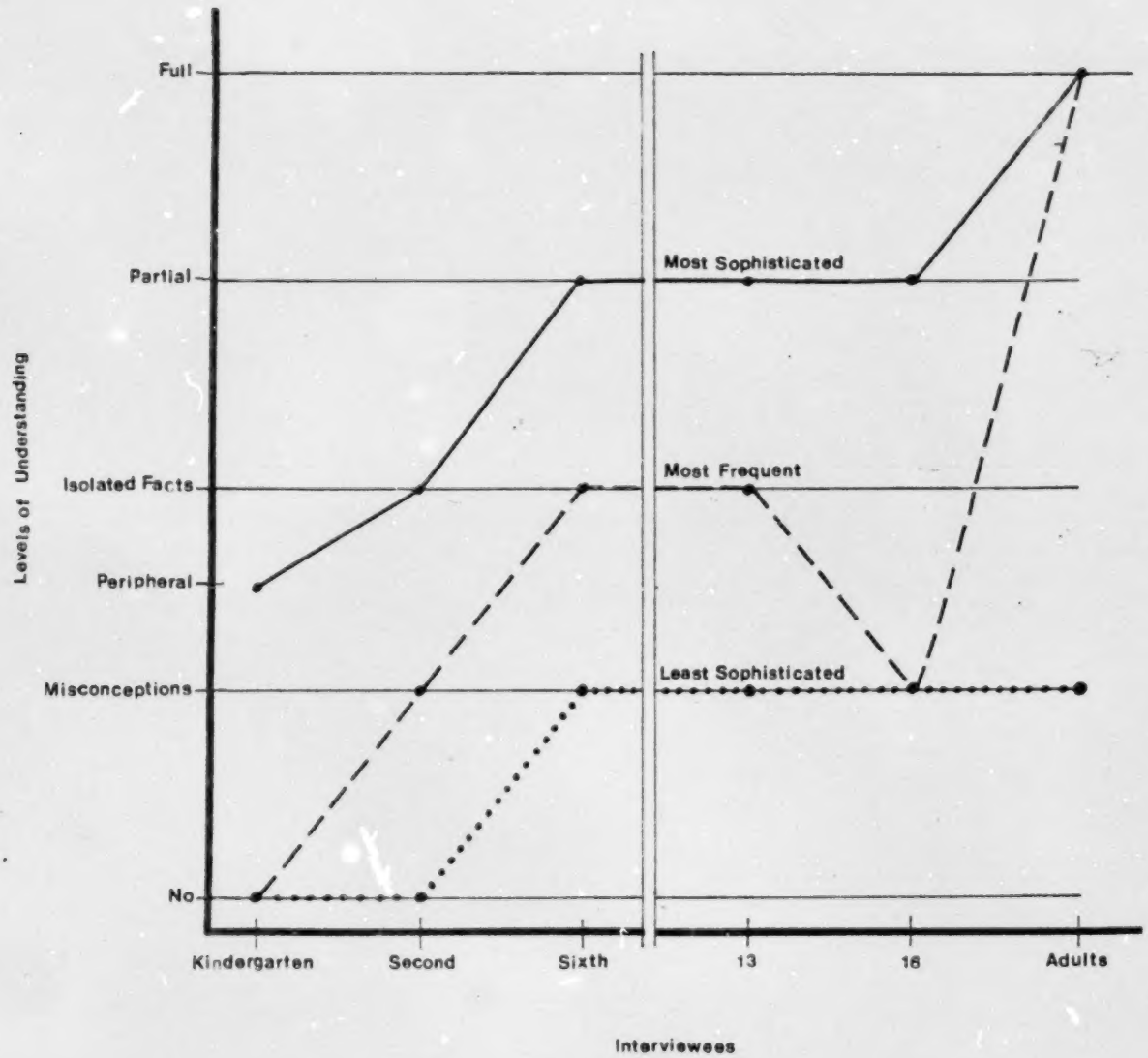
Intercoder agreement for these three measures was 95% or better for both the Phase I and Phase II subject.

Insert Figure 1 about here

There were no ethnic or sex differences in these three measures, so let us now turn to age trends for each of the three measures (see Figure 1). The points on the graph indicate, for each measure, the level of understanding at which the largest percentage of subjects in each group fall. To provide information about the continuity between the interviews for the two age groups and their corresponding coding systems, six of the interviews with thirteen-year-olds were coded with the Phase II Scale for the children. The results of this comparison showed that the two coding systems produced similar scores for the thirteen-year-olds and, therefore, we will discuss age trends from kindergarteners to adults almost as if they were continuous.

Let us first consider age trends in the most sophisticated level of understanding ever expressed. This measure indicates the highest level of understanding exhibited by each subject in any comments about the television industry. It is clear from the graph that adults are significantly ($\underline{X}^2 = 11.80$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < .05$) more likely than adolescents to make at least one statement reflecting full understanding of the industry and this trend continues to be significant as age decreases ($\underline{X}^2 = 41.35$, $\underline{df} = 12$, $\underline{p} < .001$).

Level of Understanding Used by the Largest Percentage of Interviewees at Each Age Level



To get a better idea of the distribution of the highest level of understanding across levels and age groups, let's look at the next figure (see Figure 2). As you can see, the highest point of the curves shifts pretty steadily from Full Understanding to No Understanding as age decreases.

Insert Figure 2 about here

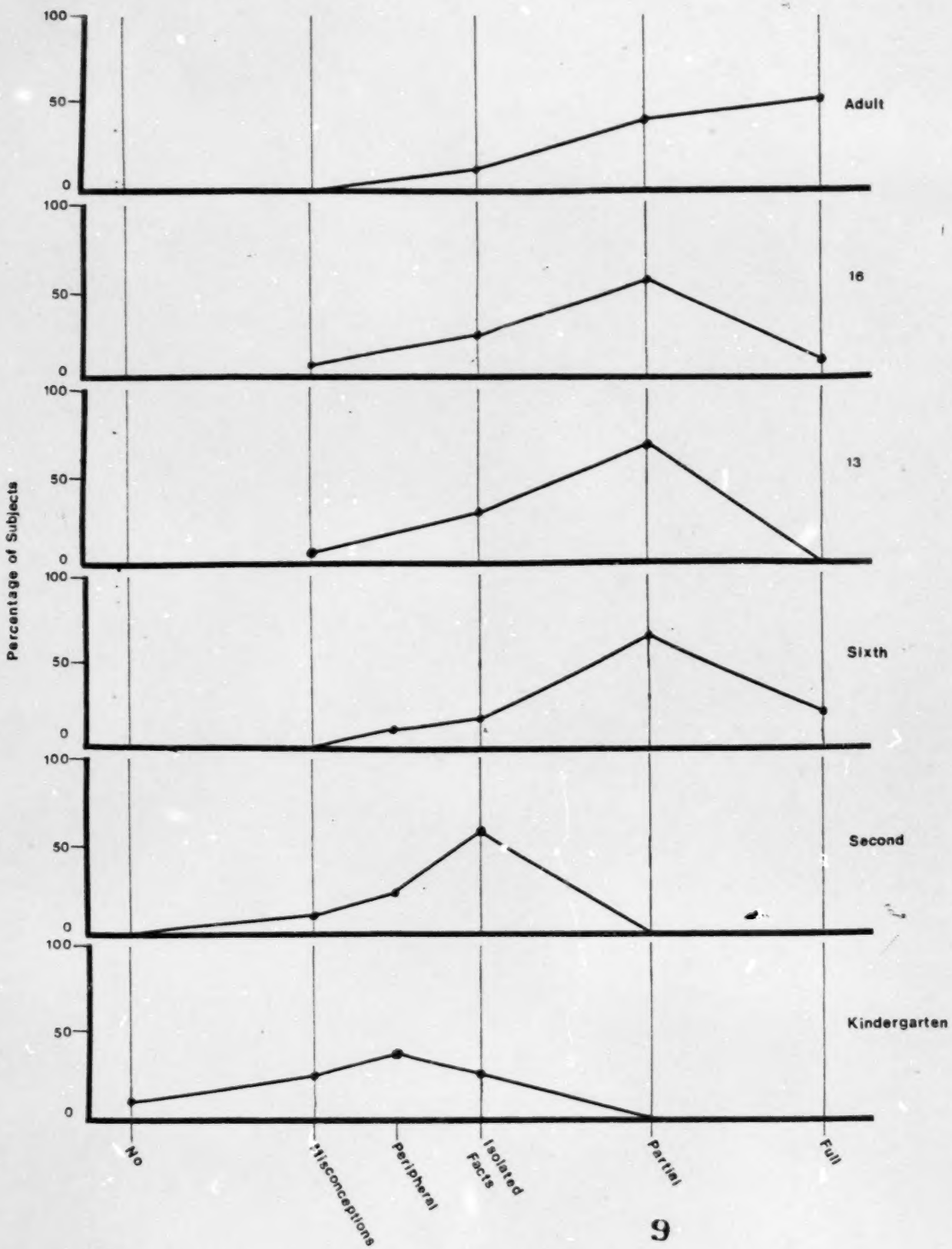
Let's go back now to the first figure and look at the least sophisticated level of understanding ever expressed. This measure indicates the lowest level of understanding exhibited by each person in any of their comments about the industry. Please keep in mind that Misconceptions is the lowest level which was coded for adolescents and adults. As you can see, most people made at least one comment which demonstrated incorrect understanding of the industry. However, the proportion varies with age. All but one of the younger subjects made at least one statement which we coded as a Misconception or as No Understanding while only three-fourths of the sixteen-year-olds and half of the adults did.

Finally, if we look at the most frequently expressed level of understanding, we see once again, major knowledge gains from kindergarten to sixth grade and from adolescence to adulthood (see Figure 1). This measure indicates which level of understanding was used most often by people in discussing the television industry. When more than one level occurred equally frequently, the more sophisticated level was taken for this measure. The sixteen-year-olds used all of the levels somewhat, spreading out the proportions who used each one most frequently. This partially explains why they appear in this figure to use a lower level of understanding than the thirteen-year-olds.

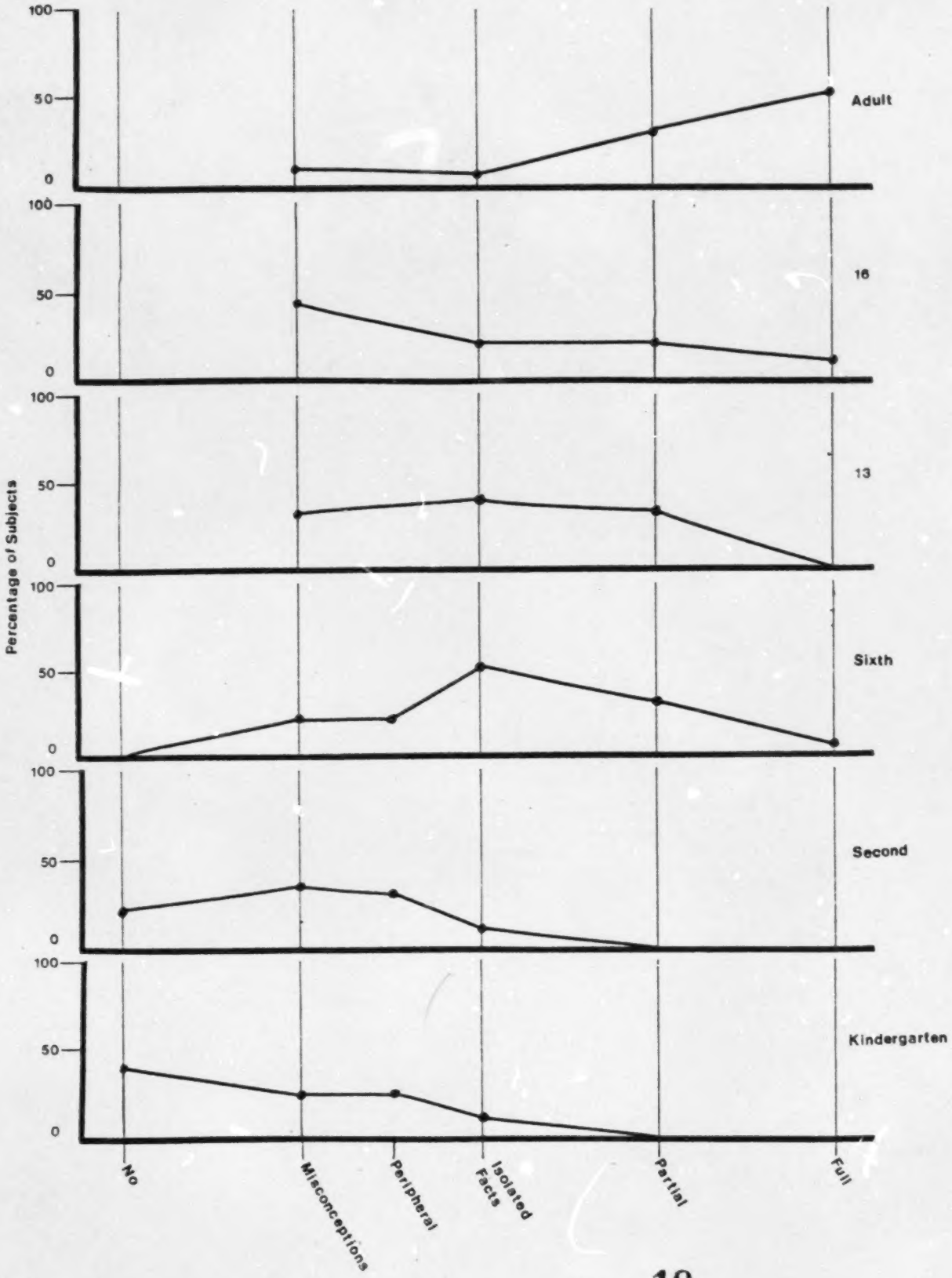
Again. let's look at the distribution of interviewee's level of understanding across levels and age group, this time with the most frequently used level as the dependent variable (see Figure 3). Here again the highest points on the graphs generally shift from Full Understanding to No Understanding as age decreases. This trend is not as clear between thirteen-year-olds and sixteen-year-olds, but you can see that while no thirteen-year-olds used Full Understanding most frequently, some of the sixteen-year-olds did.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Age Trends in Most Sophisticated Level Used



Age Trends in Most Frequently Used Level



These analyses indicate that all age groups could learn a lot more about the economics of the television industry, but that as people get older they have learned more about it. In order to find out how people learn whatever they do about television, we examined their answers to the previously mentioned questions about their experience with television. When we asked adults and adolescents if they read about television, we found that they do read about it and that a significantly greater number of adults than adolescents read ($\underline{X}^2 = 6.65$, $\underline{df} = 2$, $\underline{p} < .05$) Eight-five percent of the adults and fifty-one percent of the adolescents primarily read magazines like TV Guide and newspapers to obtain information about television. Very few of our interviewees have ever taken a course about television. Children talk significantly more about TV in school as they get older ($\underline{X}^2 = 21.42$, $\underline{df} = 6$, $\underline{p} < .005$), although in general, this means that they watch TV in the evening and tell all the jokes to their friends the following day.

We would expect that actual experience would help people to understand how television is made and accordingly grant less credibility to it. Unfortunately, our interviewees have had little experience with television equipment. Few adults, adolescents, or children have ever used a movie or video camera. A small number of kindergarteners and second graders, and a little more than a third of the sixth graders told us that they have visited a TV studio and seen a program being made.

It seems that people know little about either the economics or production of television, and those that do get it at a late age. In addition, the sources that our interviewees say they use are not likely to emphasize the aspects of the television industry which we assume would make them less ready to believe entertainment programming, that is, knowledge of the economic motives which primarily determine the content which is broadcast. It seems to us that we could teach children about the structure and workings of the television industry. What is not clear is whether or not such information would effectively encourage people to be more evaluative of programming, a problem we will take up during the coming year.